

### The Duterte administration's foreign policy: unravelling the Aquino administration's balancing agenda on an emergent China

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# Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

The Early Duterte Presidency in the Philippines

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# The Duterte Administration's Foreign Policy: Unravelling the Aquino Administration's Balancing Agenda on an Emergent China

Renato Cruz De Castro

**Abstract:** From 2010 to 2016, then-President Benigno Aquino balanced China's expansive maritime claim in the South China Sea. President Aquino challenged China by shifting the AFP's focus from domestic security to territorial defence, bolstering closer Philippine–US security relations, acquiring American military equipment, seeking from Washington an explicit security guarantee under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT), and promoting a strategic partnership with Japan. However, the Duterte administration is unravelling its predecessor's balancing agenda by distancing itself from the United States and gravitating closer to China, despite the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) July 12 2016 award to the Philippines. President Duterte's foreign policy is directed at reviving the equi-balancing policy on China, in contrast to then-President Aquino's balancing strategy. This is best exemplified by his efforts to harness China for several major infrastructure and investments projects in the Philippines and to resort to bilateral negotiations with Beijing. The present article argues that instead of relying on the US, President Duterte is fostering closer security partnership with Japan to equi-balance an emergent China.

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**Keywords:** Philippines, PR China, Philippine politics, elections, foreign policy, domestic security, territorial defence

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## Introduction

Starting in 2010, former President Benigno Aquino III adopted a balancing or a challenging policy on China's expansive maritime claim in the South China Sea. President Aquino countered China by shifting the AFP's focus from domestic security to territorial defence, bolstering closer Philippine-US security relations; acquiring American military equipment; seeking from Washington an explicit security guarantee under the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (MDT); and promoting a strategic partnership with Japan. In late April 2014, the Philippines signed the 2014 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with its strategic ally – the US. Designed to constrain China, the agreement provides American forces with a strategic footprint through rotational presence in Philippine territory. By strengthening the country's security relations with the US and Japan, the Philippines again became involved in a classical geo-political game among the great powers in East Asia. Clearly, President Aquino brought back “geo-politics” as a component of the country's external relations, thereby triggering a “revolution” in Philippine foreign policy as he challenged China's expansionist moves in the South China Sea.

President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, however, is bent on unravelling the foreign policy agenda of President Aquino III, as he declared that he will pursue an “independent foreign policy.” After less than three months in office and following the Permanent Court of Arbitration's (PCA) landmark award to the Philippines in its territorial row with China in the South China Sea, President Duterte launched a diplomatic offensive to earn Chinese goodwill. He downplayed the South China Sea dispute in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit meeting in Laos in an effort to curry diplomatic and economic concessions from China. President Duterte also declared that he wanted to distance the Philippines from the United States, a move that will not only alter the region's strategic balance but mark a dramatic departure from his country's long-standing policy of maintaining close security ties with its only strategic ally. After this trip to Laos, Duterte declared that the Philippines would stop joining the US Navy in patrolling the South China Sea to avoid upsetting Beijing. He also said that he wanted American Special Forces (SOF) supporting the AFP in counter-terrorism operations in Mindanao to withdraw from the island. Consequently, his pronouncements and actions eroded the Philippines' influence in the ASEAN on the South China Sea issue and could potentially lead to a breakdown in Philippine-US security relations.

President Duterte is currently seeking Chinese assistance for the construction of drug-rehabilitation centres for Filipino drug dependents, soft loans for the constructions of railways in Mindanao and even the acquisition of Chinese-made weapons for the AFP. His goal is to foster closer economic and diplomatic relations with China while distancing the Philippines from the US. President Duterte's foreign policy gambit is analogous to former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's equi-balancing policy on the US and China during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a diplomatic strategy, equi-balancing refers to the Southeast Asian states' policies "not to balance nor bandwagon with the great powers (the US, Japan, and China) but rather engage them through multinational institutions, particularly ASEAN and its offspring (the ARF and ASEAN +3)" (Simon 2008: 196). In applying this strategy, the small powers foster their diplomatic linkages and economic activities with two or more competing major powers to a level at which they are able to influence the major powers' policies but still insulate themselves from undue external influence. However, instead of relying on the US, President Duterte is fostering a closer security partnership with Japan to equi-balance an emergent China. This article examines the dramatic shifts in Philippine foreign policy under the Duterte administration relative to the country's relations with China and, to a certain degree, the United States. It addresses the following main questions: How is the Duterte administration unravelling the foreign policy agenda of the Aquino administration? What is the foreign policy agenda of the Duterte administration? And what are the changes and continuity in Philippine foreign policy in the face of China's emergence in East Asia?

## The Aquino Administration: Balancing China's Maritime Expansion

Upon assuming the presidency in June 2010, Aquino declared his unequivocal advocacy of transparency and accountability in governance, and support for the AFP modernisation aligned with maritime/territorial defence. Irritants in the South China Sea dispute continued to strain Philippine–China relations. On 2 March 2011, two Chinese patrol boats harassed a survey ship commissioned by the Philippine Department of Energy (DOE) to conduct oil exploration in the Reed Bank (called by the Philippines Recto Bank), 150 kilometres east of the Spratly Islands and 250 kilometres west of the Philippine island of Palawan. The Aquino administration was stunned by the Chinese action since this maritime encounter happened east of the Spratlys and its adjacent waters. Two

days after the incident, the Philippine government filed a protest with the Chinese embassy in Manila. A Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) spokesperson commented that “the Philippines is (simply) seeking an explanation for the incident.” Brushing aside the Philippine complaint, a Chinese embassy official insisted that China has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha Islands and their adjacent territory.

In early June 2011, the Philippines sought clarification on the sightings of China Marine Surveillance (CMS) and People’s Liberation Army’s Navy (PLAN) ships near the Kalayaan group of islands. Philippine defence and foreign secretaries publicly expressed the Aquino administration’s serious concerns over the alleged Chinese intrusion into the country’s EEZ to stake China’s territorial claim and to construct a planned oil rig on the uninhabited Iroquois Bank. They asserted that these “are clear violations of the China-ASEAN 2001 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties on the South China Sea” (Thayer 2011: 563). In response, the Chinese foreign ministry sternly told the Philippines to stop “harming China’s sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, which leads to unilateral actions that can expand and complicate South China Sea dispute” (*BBC Monitoring Asia-Pacific* 2011a: 1). Beijing then went on to demand that Manila first seek Chinese permission before it could conduct oil exploration activities even within the Philippines EEZ. China, in fact, badgered the Philippines and other claimant states to recognise China’s sovereign claim over the South China Sea (*BBC Monitoring Asia-Pacific* 2011b: 1). China’s heavy-handed attitude and arrogant pronouncements against the Philippines and Vietnam in the first half of 2011 escalated the maritime row. By then, President Aquino had unmistakably seen that the Philippines were on a direct collision course with China regarding the South China Sea issue.

The 2 March 2011 incident at the Reed Bank and China’s arrogant response to the Philippine diplomatic queries prompted the Aquino administration to hasten the development of the AFP’s territorial defence capabilities. The Philippines’ territorial defence goal is to establish a modest but “comprehensive border protection programme” (National Security Council 2011: 39). This task is anchored on the surveillance, deterrence, and border patrol capabilities of the PAF, the PN, and the Philippine Coast Guard, which extend from the country’s territorial waters to its contiguous and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) (National Security Council 2011: 39). This objective requires enhancement of the AFP’s capabilities, prioritisation of its needs, and gradual restructuring of its forces for territorial defence. The long-term goal, according to the 2011 *AFP’s Strategic Intent*, is to maintain a “credible deterrent posture

against foreign intrusion or external aggression, and other illegal activities while allowing free navigation to prosper" (Office of Deputy Chief-of-Staff 2011: 27). If deterrence fails, the last resort is to rely on hit-and-run tactics against the vastly superior Chinese navy and air force.

Despite its determination to boost the AFP's territorial defence capabilities, the Aquino administration was constrained by insufficient financial resources. President Aquino recognised both the urgency of modernizing the armed forces especially the PN and PAF, on the one side, and the limitations that competing demands (especially funds for education and public infrastructure) put on the military modernisation, on the other. From the Aquino administration's perspective, arms modernisation should be undertaken simply for developing a credible defence posture and not for power projection capability or outright war-fighting purposes (*Asia News Monitor* 2014: 1).

In 2012, after the tense two-month Scarborough Shoal standoff and later, China's occupation of the shoal, Manila began efforts to negotiate with Washington the "Framework Agreement on Enhanced Rotational Presence and Agreement." The agreement would facilitate the deployment of American troops and equipment on a rotational basis, thus avoiding the controversial issue of re-establishing US bases in the country. Interestingly, the negotiation was conducted against the backdrop of increased tensions between the Philippines and China because of their territorial dispute in the South China Sea. With its small and obsolete naval force and an almost non-existent air force, the Philippines was relying on the US to help in the modernisation of its military and defence capabilities through short-term regular visits by American forces that would conduct joint training, humanitarian and disaster response operations with the AFP. More significantly, the Philippines is also banking on the deterrent effect that can be generated by the temporary deployment of US forces and their equipment in its territory.

On 28 April 2014, the Philippines and the United States signed the Enhance Defence Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) a few hours before President Barack Obama's arrival in the Philippines. The allies consider the EDCA as an executive agreement that merely updates and enhances the 1951 Mutual Defence Treaty (*Philippine News Agency* 2014: 1). The EDCA provides the framework by which the Philippines and the US can develop their individual and collective (defence) capabilities. This would be through the rotational deployment of American forces in Philippine bases that can expand opportunities for training and support for the long-term modernisation of the Philippine military (Garamone 2014: 1). The agreement allows American forces to access and utilise designated

areas in AFP-owned and -controlled facilities but the Philippine base commander will have unhampered access to those agreed locations. It also provides that the US military can build or improve the infrastructures inside these agreed locations but will share these facilities with the AFP. Furthermore, any construction and other activities within those Philippine bases would require the consent of the host country through the MDB and the Security Engagement Board (SEB).

The signing of the EDCA conveyed a strong diplomatic signal to Beijing that it would have to take account of American military presence in the Philippines if it was to use force against Manila to resolve their intense territorial dispute in the South China Sea. More significantly, temporary US military presence in its territory would strengthen the Philippines' determination to uphold its territorial claims vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea dispute, and in the future, might also test American resolve and credibility to honour its defence commitment to the Philippines. The negotiations with the Philippines on rotational US military presence also sent a message to other claimant states in the South China Sea dispute, such as Vietnam and even Malaysia, about the prospect of bolstering their military relations with the US based on the terms that are acceptable to them.

Aside from strengthening its alliance with the US, the Philippines also promoted its strategic partnership with Japan, China's main rival in East Asia. In the aftermath of the Scarborough Shoal stand-off, Tokyo became more forthright in extending security assistance to the Philippines. In July 2012, then Japanese Defence Minister Satoshi Morimoto, and his Filipino counterpart, Defence Secretary Gazmin, inked a bilateral agreement on maritime security. The agreement calls for high-level dialogues between defence officials and reciprocal visits by the MSDF chief of staff and the PN flag commander. It also features various security-related activities such as the Multinational Cooperation Program in the Asia-Pacific (MCAP), multilateral logistic staff talks (MLST), training exchanges and subject matter exchanges on HADR and logistics; and exchange visits and student exchanges in the two countries' respective staff colleges. A few days later, then Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario announced that Tokyo was likely to provide the PCG with 10 40-meter boats as part of Japan's ODA to the Philippines by the end of 2012. Newspapers also reported that two additional bigger vessels are being considered for transfer to the Philippine government under a grant.

In his visit to Japan in early June 2015, former President Aquino and Prime Minister Abe signed a joint declaration on "A Strengthened



Strategic Partnership for Advancing the Shared Principles and Partnership and Goals for Peace, Security, and Growth in the Region and Beyond.” The communiqué commits Japan to the following: (1) enhancing the capacity of the PCG, (2) cooperating with the Philippines on maritime security specifically on maritime domain awareness, and (3) raising the prospects for the transfer of Japanese defence equipment and technology to the Philippines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015: 4). In a press briefing, President Aquino announced the forthcoming negotiations on a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that would allow SDF access to Philippine military bases. He disclosed that Philippine–Japan SOFA is possible since both countries have boosted their security relationship significantly over the past few years. The SDF’s use of Philippine bases on a limited and rotational basis will be useful as Japan actively pursues a policy of pro-active contribution to peace in East Asia. With refuelling and basing facilities in the Philippines, units of the ASDF and MSDF can conduct joint patrols with their American counterparts for a longer period of time and over a larger area of the South China Sea.

Aside from fostering its security ties with the US and Japan, the Philippines also opted to apply a legal/liberal approach to constrain China’s maritime expansion in the South China Sea. In January 2013, the Philippines directly confronted China’s expansive claim in the South China Sea by filing a statement of claim against China in the Arbitral Tribunal of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. In its Notification and Statement of Claim, the Philippines asked the arbitral tribunal to determine the country’s legal entitlements under the UNCLOS to the Spratly Islands, Scarborough Shoal, Mischief Reef, and other land features within its 200-mile EEZ. These entitlements are based on the provisions of the UNCLOS, specifically it’s the Philippines’ rights to a Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone under Part II, to an Exclusive Economic Zone under Part V, and to a Continental Shelf under Part VI (Department of Foreign Affairs 2013: 12–14).

In its statement of claim, the Philippines made it clear that it does not seek arbitration over which party has sovereignty over the islands. Rather, it merely requested the arbitral tribunal to issue an opinion on the following issues: (a) whether China’s maritime claim in the South China Sea based on its so-called nine-dash line claim is valid or contrary to UNCLOS; and (b) whether Scarborough Shoal, Johnson Reef, Cuarteron Reef, and Fiery Reef, which are submerged features and that are below sea level at high tide are islands or rocks under Article 121 (3) of the Convention. The Philippines also petitioned the Arbitral Tribunal to declare that the Philippines is entitled to a 12-mile Territorial Sea, a 200-

mile EEZ, and a Continental Shelf under Parts II, V, and VI of UNCLOS and that China has unlawfully prevented the Philippines from exercising its rights to exploit resources in its EEZ and to navigation within and beyond the 200-mile of the Philippines' archipelagic baselines (Department of Foreign Affairs 2013: 18–19).

## Questioning the Geopolitical Agenda

During his campaign for the presidency, Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte was highly critical of the Aquino administration's balancing policy on China relative to the South China Sea dispute. As a self-proclaimed social-democratic and nationalist, Duterte declared during his sorties that he was willing to have bilateral talks with China over the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea dispute. He also suggested the possibility of joint exploration of the South China Sea's natural resources and expressed that he would like to see China building railroads in the troubled island of Mindanao in exchange for his temporary silence on the maritime dispute (Steinbock 2016: 1). Mayor Duterte declared that, unlike his predecessor, he was open to engaging China in bilateral negotiations, to pursuing joint development of resources in the South China Sea and to downplaying the sovereignty dispute if China also stopped insisting on its own sovereignty claim (Baviera 2016: 203). Duterte was also disparaging of the Philippine–US alliance as he said that he had little confidence that the United States would honour its treaty commitment to the Philippines when it comes to the South China Sea dispute.

Before his inauguration on 30 June 2016, Duterte declared that he wanted a closer relation with China and that he wouldn't continue the military modernisation programme started by his predecessor. His early statements indicated that he would not pursue the modernisation of the AFP with as much vigour as President Aquino. Observers thought that President Duterte would follow former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's national security policy of gravitating close to China while ignoring territorial defence and focusing on neutralising domestic security challenges such as terrorism and insurgencies. The modernisation of the AFP was linked to President Aquino's agenda of challenging China's expansive maritime claim in the South China Sea. President Duterte's agenda to improve bilateral relations with China may mean that public investments in territorial defence would be decreased, if not terminated. Thus, one noted Filipino academic noted: "It may be anticipated that under Duterte, the Philippines may revert to hedging strategy on China,

in contrast to Aquino who had edged too close to balancing/containment policy" (Baviera 2016: 205).

## The PCA Award to the Philippines: Signalling an Entente with China

After a three-year wait, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rendered its ruling on the maritime dispute between the Philippines and China on 12 July 2016. The five-judge tribunal unanimously ruled in favour of the Philippines on almost all of the claims in made against China. The PCA rendered China's claim to historic rights through its nine-dash line in the South China Sea as contrary to international law. The PCA determined that none of the Spratlys are legally islands because they cannot sustain a stable human community or independent economic life. Finally, it found China of guilty of damaging the marine environment by building artificial islands, of illegally preventing Filipinos from fishing and conducting oil explorations in the Philippines' EEZs.

Despite its overwhelming legal victory and the fact that the 12 July 2016 PCA ruling was the most anticipated decision of any international court or tribunal on the law of the sea, the Duterte administration met the decision with a sober, cautious, and even muted reaction. The Duterte administration's response was ultra-low-key as he fulfilled his earlier promise that he would not flaunt a favourable ruling over China. Although the domestic reaction was overwhelmingly positive and jubilant, Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay merely said that he welcomed the ruling and called on the Filipinos to exercise restraint and sobriety. During the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Laos, Secretary Yasay withdrew the country's motion to include the PCA decision in the ASEAN Joint Communique after Cambodia objected to its inclusion. Assigned to be the country's special envoy to China, former President Fidel Ramos even suggested that the president should set the PCA award aside as his administration pursues bilateral negotiations with China. Clearly, the Duterte administration is sending signals to China that it is willing to appease its realpolitik agenda in the South China Sea.

The Philippine government's cautious reaction to the PCA awards was due to the Duterte administration's fear that flaunting its legal victory against China might force the later to react adversely against Filipino fishermen and Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) units stationed on islands occupied by the Philippines in the South China Sea. This was also because of the government's realisation that it cannot implement the PCA's rewards because of the weakness of the Philippine Navy (PN) and

the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) compared with the large and well-equipped Chinese naval and civilian presence in the South China Sea. Beijing immediately declared that it was ready to start negotiations with Manila on the South China Sea dispute if the latter ignored the 12 July 2016 PCA award (*Associated Press* 2016: 1). Accordingly, negotiations between the Philippines and China could cover “issues such as joint development and cooperation in scientific research if the new government puts the Tribunal ruling aside before returning to the table for talks” (*Reuters* 2016: 1). China also threatened the Philippines with possible confrontation if the latter insisted on using the PCA decision as the basis for the bilateral negotiation (Viray 2016: 1). The Philippines rejected China’s pre-condition for bilateral negotiation, citing that it was not consistent with the country’s constitution and national interests (Viray 2016: 1). On 21 July 2016, Presidential Spokesperson Ernesto Abella announced that the Philippines would consider the views of its allies in its engagements with China, whose expansive territorial claim in the South China Sea was declared void by the PCA (Romero 2016a: 1).

Before the ASEAN summit in Laos in September 2016, President Duterte said that the July 12 PCA ruling was purely a bilateral issue between the Philippines and China, not a matter for ASEAN, echoing both Cambodia’s and China’s position on this matter. On 13 September 2016, he announced an end to Philippine–US joint patrols in the South China and, instead, the PN should only limit its patrol within the country’s territorial waters to avoid provoking other countries (Solomon and Cullison 2016: 1). In his speech at the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington DC in late September 2016, Secretary Yasay reasoned out “that joint patrols (with the US) could be seen by China as a provocative acting, making it more difficult to peacefully resolve territorial disputes” (Katigbak 2016: 1). Interestingly, he then added that the Philippines is quietly making arrangements through diplomatic channels for bilateral talks with China without any preconditions to discuss their competing claims in the South China Sea. Clearly, the Duterte administration is determined to establish an entente with China even though Chinese Navy and Coast Guard vessels are operating inside sensitive parts of the South China Sea such as in the Scarborough Shoal and Mischief Reef, and despite the PCA’s ruling that favoured the Philippine against China.

## Unravelling the Balancing Agenda

In the first weeks of its term, the Duterte administration seemed to be following his predecessor's balancing agenda on China. A few days after President Duterte's inauguration on 30 June 2016, Secretary of National Defence (DND) Delfin Lorenzana assured the AFP and the Filipino public that the Duterte administration would pursue the modernisation of the Philippine military (Laude 2016: 1). Secretary Lorenzana accentuated that territorial defence is one of the priorities of the Duterte administration because "it is very important as we need to protect our territories against encroachment by other parties" (*Philippine News Agency* 2016: 1). He then added that the 15-year AFP modernisation programme would continue as scheduled. However, Secretary Lorenzana clarified that there will be some "redirection" as the Duterte administration is determined to decisively deal with criminality, especially the Abu Sayyaf bandits, as it gives the Philippines a bad name due to its series of kidnappings of Malaysian and Indonesian sailors off the Sulu Sea (*Philippine News Agency* 2016: 2).

In the aftermath of the 12 July PCA award to the Philippines, Secretary Lorenza highlighted the urgent need for the Philippines to upgrade its coast guard, navy, and air force to prevent other countries from encroaching on its territory, especially its maritime territory (Nepomuceno 2016: 1). He added that

In the long run, we will still follow our modernisation [programme] because you know it jibes with what our long-term plans [of] having credible deterrence to secure our territory (especially) maritime plan. (*NewsDesk* 2016: 1)

These developments seemed to indicate, that despite its earlier pronouncement about reviving the bilateral negotiations with China and conducting joint developments in the South China Sea, the Duterte administration was taking into account its predecessors' agenda of challenging China's expansive claim in the disputed waters. One prominent Filipino academic even quipped: "Duterte's foreign policy will not only depend on his personal preferences and inclinations but, like his predecessors, will be defined by other internal and external factors" (Baviera 2016: 206).

However, President Duterte changed gear after the United States became critical of his domestic agenda of waging a so-called war on drugs and criminality that had claimed more than 3,000 lives since May 2017. His current pronouncements and decisions indicate that he plans to distance the Philippines from its only strategic ally, the United States.

At the same time, he wants warmer and closer relations with China, despite the PCA's award invalidating its expansive claim in the South China Sea, and the presence of Chinese Coast Guard vessels near sensitive spots in the South China Sea, such as around Scarborough Shoal and Mischief Reefs, both deep inside the Philippines' EEZ.

During the two ASEAN summits and the East Asian Summit (EAS) in Laos, President Duterte gave remarks that were interpreted as insulting to President Barack Obama. This led to the cancellation of the scheduled bilateral meetings between the two heads of states. Duterte then skipped the US-ASEAN Summit and then, instead of reading his prepared speech on the PCA award to the Philippines, criticised American human rights abuses allegedly committed against the Filipino Muslims in Mindanao in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was President Duterte's response to Washington's growing criticism of alleged human rights violations resulting from his anti-narcotics/anti-criminal campaign in the Philippines (Oxford Daily Brief Service 2016: 1).

On 12 September 2016, President Duterte suddenly announced that US special forces operating in Mindanao must leave the country, arguing that there could be no peace in this southern Philippine islands as long as these American troops are operating there (Cagahastian 2016: 3). He also warned that they are vulnerable to Abu Sayyaf bandits who could kidnap or kill them, thus complicating the prevailing problem of peace and order in Mindanao (Cagahastian 2016: 3). The following day, he announced that the PN would stop joint patrol with the US Navy in the Philippines' EEZ in order to avoid upsetting China (Moss 2016: 1). Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay explained that "the inadequately armed Philippine military cannot fight China in any battle, thus, President Duterte ordered the Navy not conduct joint patrols in the South China Sea with the US Navy" (Katigbak 2016: 1). He then said that Philippine-US patrols in the South China Sea could be seen by China as a provocative act, making it more difficult to peacefully resolve the two countries' territorial dispute (Katigbak 2016: 1). Accordingly, rather "than worry over a possible war in the South China Sea," President Duterte encouraged the military "to focus on domestic security challenges such as fighting drug lords and traffickers, and insurgents" (Moss 2016: 2).

During his two-day official visit in Vietnam in late September 2017, Duterte announced that the Philippine-US amphibious landing exercise (Phiblex) 2016 that took place from 4–12 October 2016 would be the last military exercise between the two allies during his term (Aurelio 2016: 1). President Duterte explained that while he pledged to honour the long-standing defence treaty with the US, China opposes joint mili-

tary drills in the Philippines, leaving him with no choice but to cancel such exercises with the US (Aurelio 2016: 1). President Duterte's statement on the termination of joint Philippine-US military exercises is considered the strongest indication of a slow break-down in the alliance that the Obama administration has been trying to shore up in the light of the US strategic rebalancing to Asia.

While distancing himself from the US, President Duterte has pursued a calibrated foreign policy characterised by gravitating closer to China. He has declared that he is opened to direct bilateral negotiations with China. In contrast, former President Aquino brought the dispute to international arbitration at the Permanent Court of International Arbitration in The Hague in the Netherlands. In an effort to win China's confidence, he declared that the 12 July Permanent Court of Arbitration Award to the Philippines is purely a bilateral issue between the Philippines and China, not a matter for the ASEAN, echoing Chinese position on this matter (Oxford Daily Brief Service 2016: 2). President Duterte's foreign secretary, Perfecto Yasay, declared that:

the relationship between the two countries [China and the Philippines] was not limited to the maritime dispute. There were other areas of concern in such fields as investment, trade, and tourism and discussing then could open the doors for talks on the maritime issues. (Katigbak 2016: 2)

In late September 2017, President Duterte announced that he would forge "new alliances" with China and Russia to cushion the fallout from the possible withdrawal of the US from the Philippines in 2017 (Cabacungan 2016: 1). In a speech delivered in the province of Pampanga, he urged Filipinos to make a small sacrifice for what he described as his plan to "cross the Rubicon" in his ties with the US, as he is pursuing partnerships with rival countries (China and Russia) or what he called countries on the other side of the ideological barrier (Cabacungan 2016: 1). He also announced that he would visit Russia and China in 2016 to chart an independent foreign policy and "open (new) alliances" with these two regional powers that have historic rivalries with the Philippines' only strategic ally: the US. In his major speeches and policy initiatives in October 2016, Duterte signalled that he is creating a diplomatic/strategic distance between the Philippines and the United States, while also planning to pivot towards the US's geo-strategic rivals – China and Russia (*Agence France Press* 2016: 1). Duterte announced that 250 Filipino businessmen would accompany him when he visits China on 20–21 October 2017, as he puts aside years of hostility to seek a new partnership with



China at a time when tension between the Philippines and its traditional ally, the US, was mounting (Morales and Lerma 2016: 1).

During his 21 October state visit to Beijing, President Duterte declared his separation from the United States and his realignment with China as the two countries agreed to resolve their dispute in the South China Sea through bilateral negotiations. President Duterte's declaration of his separation from his country's only treaty ally was seen as a serious setback for the United States, and a great Chinese diplomatic victory as this would have "a radiating effect in the region that would bring other estranged neighbours closer to China's orbit" (*People's Daily* 2016: 2). This move revealed President Duterte's scheme of moving the Philippines away from its traditional links to the US toward a more independent posture so it can adroitly balance the major powers in East Asia, similar to what President Arroyo did during her nine-year term.

President Duterte is reviving the equi-balancing strategy to replace the Aquino administration's balancing policy on China. The purpose of this strategy is to create a more positive political atmosphere in Philippine–China bilateral relations that can allow both sides to embark on major infrastructure and investment projects, as well as other forms of cooperation that may help restore mutual trust and confidence (Baviera 2016: 205). However, unlike President Arroyo, who tried to balance the Philippines' relation with both China and the US, President Duterte seems to be determined to effect a major break from the US as he vowed to review the 2014 EDCA, which provides American forces temporary access to Philippine military bases (Romero 2016b: 1). President Duterte's pronouncements point to his goal of unravelling his predecessor's balancing policy of challenging China's expansive claims in the South China Sea as he alienates his country's long-standing ally while moving closer to a regional power bent on effecting a territorial revision in the East Asia.

However, President Duterte's independent foreign policy could prove domestically unpopular as it goes against the widely held perception of a China threat among ordinary Filipinos, and alienates the country's traditional economic and security partners such as Japan, the United States, and the European Union (Lopez 2016: 1). Also, Duterte's tirades against the US and friendly overtures to the Philippines' main protagonist in the South China Sea do not sit well with the AFP. Military officers who have spent their lives and careers in working with the US military fighting communists and Islamic militants are not comfortable with the sudden and dramatic shift in the country's foreign policy (Moss 2016: 1). These officers are also anxious that the president is throwing away the



only card that the Philippines has to play in its territorial dispute with the China in the South China Sea: the American security umbrella (Moss 2016: 1). Concerned about the sudden changes in Philippine foreign policy, the Philippine Senate is set to conduct an inquiry on the foreign policy direction of the Duterte administration (Doctolero 2016: 1). The senate probe was triggered by what some senators see as the current administration's lack of a clear strategic foreign policy goal and the conflicting positions between the president and his cabinet officials on several foreign policy issues (Doctolero 2016: 1).

President Duterte's new foreign policy direction has become unsettling not only for many Filipinos but also for its allies such as the US and Japan, and presumably in among ASEAN countries, which see the arbitration case alongside the country's active support for the US military presence in Southeast Asia as pillars of stability in the management of their own relations with China. American officials admitted that the Obama administration has been stunned by the position of the President Duterte and was still working out how to respond (Solomon and Cullison 2016: 2). Puzzled by the changes in Philippine foreign policy, the Japanese government decided to persevere with its nuanced or unique approach in dealing with the Philippines. A senior Japanese official admitted that while Tokyo and Washington share the same goal in the Philippines, Japan takes a different approach in its relations with the Philippines, as there are some things that Manila can only accept when Japan provides them (Wanklyn and Mie 2016: 1). Unlike the US, which has been taken aback by President Duterte's anti-American pronouncements, Japan continued its comprehensive engagement with the Philippines (Wanklyn and Mie 2016: 1).

Ironically, while President Duterte is seeking a fresh relationship with Beijing, he is also fostering a security partnership with China's foremost rival in East Asia: Japan. Although Duterte has been very critical of the Philippine-US alliance, he has never criticised or even mentioned the Philippine-Japan security partnership. Prior to his working visit to Japan, Duterte expressed his willingness to advance defence cooperation between the Philippines and Japan (*Jiji Press English News Service* 2016: 1). During his working visit to Japan in October 2016, President Duterte discussed maritime security cooperation with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. President Duterte sought Japan's support for joint ventures in key infrastructure development, especially in terms of harnessing Japanese expertise in developing a high-quality and modern public transportation system. More significantly, he also engaged Prime Minister Abe in a discussion of greater politico-social and defence cooperation, particu-

larly in maritime domain awareness and maritime security (Cabacungan 2016: 2).

During his visit, he signed the Exchange of Notes on Japanese Official Development Assistance for the provision of two large-scale patrol vessels that were put aside from the 10 patrol vessels that Tokyo is in the process of delivering to the PCG. Japan's provision of the two 90-meter patrol vessels will boost the capabilities of the PCG since white ships are often used on the front line of the various territorial dispute in maritime East Asia, given that the deployment of grey ships in disputed waters is seen as overly provocative. On 12 October, the PCG commissioned the first multi-role response vessel (MRRV), *PCGS Tubbataha*, which will be used for patrol, search and rescue, and law-enforcement operation in the Philippine maritime territory. The remaining nine vessels will be delivered serially until 2018. In the past few years, Japan has provided rescue equipment, training facilities, communication systems, maritime safety equipment, satellite-based communication system and a vessel traffic management system (VTMS) to the PCG.

Significantly, Japan has provided the Philippines with military equipment and training. President Duterte also witnessed the signing of the Memorandum of Implementation and Letter of Arrangement for the transfer of Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF)'s training aircraft TC-90 maritime reconnaissance planes for the PN (Cigalal 2016: 1). Japan will also provide training for PN aviators and develop the infrastructures for these reconnaissance aircraft that will patrol the South China Sea (Cigalal 2016: 1). Interestingly, President Duterte also hinted that the Philippine could conduct naval exercises with Japan, but he repeated that there would no more joint exercises with the United States.

The most important accomplishment of Duterte's working visit to Japan was the two countries' signing of the 26 October 2016 Japan-Philippine Joint Statement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016: 1). The statement commits both countries to the maintenance of the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea that holds the sea lanes vital for global economic activity and viability. The two leaders also reaffirmed the importance of the stronger (security) ties between Japan and the Philippines to promote the peace, stability and maritime security of the region. The statement also highlights the importance of alliances as it states:

The two leaders look to their network of friendships and alliances, in particular the ever stronger ties between the Japan and the Philippines, to help promote the peace, stability and maritime security of the region. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016: 2)

On one hand, President Duterte's decision to enhance the Philippine–Japan security partnership indicate that, despite his efforts to improve Philippine–China economic relations, he sees the need to equi-balance among the major powers. A strengthened security partnership with Japan enables the Philippines to effectively play its classic diplomatic gambit of equi-balancing, or the art of pitting one great power against the other, thus preventing the Philippines from effecting a total pivot to China. On the other hand, Japan's goal is to assist the Philippines improve its maritime surveillance capabilities in the light of increasing Chinese maritime activities in the South China Sea. Aware that strained Philippine–US relations benefit China, Japan is strengthening its relations with the Duterte administration by fostering periodic consultations between the two countries, and strengthening its navy's and coast guard's maritime domain awareness capabilities. Japan is the only Western country with a healthy and cordial relationship with the Philippines, making it an important counter-vailing force to an expected increase in Chinese influence in the light of President Duterte's efforts to forge a new economic partnership with China. This is only natural because Japan is one of the Philippines' most important trade partners and the country's biggest source of foreign direct investments. Japan is also the Philippines' largest Official Development Assistance (ODA) donor.

## Conclusion

From 2011 to 2016, the Aquino administration pursued a balancing policy on China as it promoted closer security cooperation with the US. This policy can be traced back to 2011, when President Aquino stood up to China's expansive claim and heavy-handed behaviour in the South China Sea. He redirected the AFP's focus from domestic security to territorial defence, fostered deeper Philippine–US security arrangements, acquired American military equipment and sought from Washington an unequivocal security guarantee under the 1951 MDT. The most salient component of this foreign policy was the signing of the EDCA, which provided American forward-deployed forces strategic rotational presence in Philippine territory, as well as extensive access to Philippine military facilities. The agreement was forged in order to strategically constrain China, which has increased its territorial foothold in the South China Sea. Predictably, the consequences of this policy shift are two-pronged: it has strengthened Philippine–US alliance and inescapably strained Philippine–China bilateral relations.

President Duterte's pronouncements and actions point to his goal of unravelling his predecessor's foreign policy agenda of balancing China's expansive claim in the South China Sea. He has distanced his country from its long-standing treaty ally while moving closer to a regional power bent on effecting a territorial revision in the East Asia. His foreign policy is aimed at reviving the equi-balancing policy on China, in contrast to President Aquino's balancing strategy. This is best exemplified by his efforts to harness China to several major infrastructure and investments projects in the Philippines and to resort to bilateral negotiations with Beijing. However, President Duterte's efforts to gravitate closer to China at a time when Philippine-US security relations are at rock bottom created a popular misconception that the Philippines is about to embark on a total pivot toward China. Ironically, while President Duterte is seeking a fresh relationship with Beijing; he is also fostering a security partnership with China's main rival in East Asia: Japan. President Duterte has been very critical about the Philippine-US alliance but has never publicly criticised or even mentioned the Philippine-Japan security partnership. A functioning security partnership with Japan has also enabled the Philippines to effectively play its classic diplomatic gambit of equi-balancing. Japan is the only Western country to have a healthy and cordial relationship with the Philippines, making it an important counter-vailing force to an expected increase in Chinese influence in the light of President Duterte's efforts to forge a new economic partnership with China.

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